

The Nexus of Gender, Class and Generation

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This paper sets the stage for a longer study of how the leaders of Japan's postwar labor unions – themselves young radicals during the 1920s and 1930s – sought to harness the young blue-collar radicals who, alienated from union authorized political struggles of the Old Left, chose to join in the New Left movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In my earlier work I argue that during the early decades of the postwar era, public and private institutions constructed social roles for blue-collar men that augured the reemergence of a common set of gender practices legitimizing the subordination of women to men and the dominance of some men over others. The resultant hegemonic masculine ideal for the blue-collar “working man” was nonetheless ideologically flexible: labor leaders found it useful as a means of mobilizing union militancy, corporate managers were able to deploy it to quell union militancy, and the state found it a useful symbol of Japan's economic success. By the mid-1960s, work had become the measure of citizenship, employment synonymous with manhood, and Japanese men the breadwinners of postwar society.

My current research examines the extent to which the socially constructed aspects of gender identity influenced the economic and political choices made by two generations of blue-collar Japanese, born in the 1920s and 1940s, during the high-growth 1960s. Blue-collar workers formed the economic base of Japan's greatly expanded middle-class all through the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, Japan's period of high economic growth from the mid-1960s to the late-1980s brought better wages overall, and even took Japan to the brink of becoming the largest economy in the world. That said, higher wages for Japan's blue-collar workers were not the result of the *noblesse oblige* of corporate managers, but were instead won by nearly two decades of intense union militancy that by the early 1960s saw successive years of five to six percent wage increases for the majority of Japan's unionized full-time blue-collar workers. The fulcrum of their success was the ability of socialist labor leaders to leverage their influence over nearly 6 million workers and coordinate annual pattern-bargaining struggles to pressure the majority of private and public sector employers to accede to their wage demands (Gerteis 2009, 65-91).

Much to the surprise of the leaders of the dominant socialist labor federation *Nihon Sōhyō*

Gikai (Sōhyō), whose focus on achieving higher worker's wages was a means to achieving a socialist victory in parliament, increasing standards of living for Japan's blue-collar workers led to a significant change in workers' aspirations. By the mid-1970s the majority of blue-collar Japanese, young and old, increasingly expressed to union interviewers that they were much more interested in achieving material prosperity through car ownership and ski vacation than by winning a socialist victory in parliament. Although not terribly surprising to the external observer, the shift in focus nevertheless made it increasingly difficult for union leaders to garner the support of the rank-and-file. But perhaps more significantly the shift in material circumstances and worker mentalité also contributed to a generational schism as younger men and women increasingly rejected the hegemonic masculine 'family man' and 'housewife' ideal-type gender identities that the labor movement had made front and center of their mobilization campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s (Gerteis 2009).

By analyzing the ways in which middle-aged male leaders of Japan's largest labor unions perceived politically active, young blue-collar men and women, I aim to show how generational conflict influenced the ways in which an increasing number of blue-collar men of all ages identified with middle-class cultural and economic forms. One result was the fracturing of the Old Left's monopoly on class-based ideals of masculinity, which set the stage for a cascade of class and gender confusions that have shaped popular notions of "work" and "manhood" to the present day.

The sometimes violent confrontations between labor and management that characterized labor relations during the late 1940s and 1950s contributed to the creation of a postwar wage system premised on the notion that a blue-collar man was the sole breadwinner for his family, and set the stage for the increased standards of living that accompanied double-digit economic growth in the 1960s (Kumazawa 1996, 52; Gordon 1998, 163-168). Developing alongside similar wage systems for white-collar workers, the blue-collar age- and seniority-based wage system can be seen as one cause for young blue-collar men becoming alienated from their predominantly left-led labor union, because it left them lesser paid, despite individual skill and ability, and hierarchically subordinate to the older generation of male workers.

The socialist labor movement, which represented the majority of wage-earning men and women until the late 1980s, was no stranger to the use of gender norms as a means of mobilizing the Japanese working class. Labor propaganda had deployed gendered tropes since the early twentieth century, but the material basis for the postwar labor movement's reconstruction of customary gender roles fully emerged in the early 1950s (Gerteis 2007, 2009, 2014). The Densan Wage System, named for the Electrical Utility Workers' Union (*Nihon Denki Sangyō Rōdō Kumiai Rengō Kyōgikai*, or *Densan*), which created it in the late 1940s, quickly became the basis upon which the socialist General Council of Trade Unions (*Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyōgikai*, or *Sōhyō*), a national federation of unions representing

approximately six million wage earners, assessed target wages for the pattern bargaining campaigns that consisted of contract negotiations between an industry-wide union and one employer during which the union focused all its resources on winning a favorable contract from that employer and then used the conflict and resultant agreement as a precedent to demand similar contracts from additional employers not otherwise bound by the original agreement. By the mid-1950s, Densan had won several contracts that assessed worker wages based on the real cost of living as calculated by the union, not the government or management (Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyōgikai 1964, 362-373).

A radical reconceptualization of the purpose of the workplace itself, the Densan Wage System ignored corporate profit (not a particularly pressing issue for a publicly owned utility) and privileged need by emphasizing that the purpose of work was to enable a worker to live the minimum cultured life guaranteed by Article 25 of the 1947 Constitution of Japan. The Densan “market-basket” wage system established base wages based on the actual cost of food staples, housing, transportation, and medical care. Created to suit the needs of a majority male workforce, it was built on the premise that a male wage earner headed each worker household. By adopting the Densan market-basket ideal, Sōhyō promoted the demand for a family-centered wage for all Sōhyō workers. This resulted in a federation-wide wage system that privileged the male breadwinner as the economic goal central to union activism.

In the mid-1950s, Sōhyō secretary-general Ōta Kaoru institutionalized the market-basket system by incorporating its premise that a workers’ wages supported a wife and children at home into the way Sōhyō determined the base wage demanded during the annual Spring Wage Offensive (Shuntō). The Shuntō were jointly coordinated campaigns in which public and private sector unions collaborated in a series of direct actions in support of large-scale pattern bargaining for minimum increases in base wages. Both private and public railway unions played a central role in the success of the Shuntō because their ability to shut down the transportation nexus on command was crucial to Sōhyō’s ability to engage in pattern bargaining with public and private officials. The Spring Wage Offensive provided a powerful, coordinated structure within which both private and public sector unions could ensure incremental wage increases during the high-speed double-digit growth of the 1960s, and it consequently dominated the collective bargaining arena until the late 1990s (Kume 1998, 73-106; Weathers 2008, 177-197).

With the launch of the first nationally coordinated Shuntō in 1956, the concept of a family wage gained hold through the federation’s demand for base wages determined by the needs of a male worker’s family implicit in the market-basket wage demanded by Densan in the early 1950s. At the heart of this system lay the fundamental assumption that women’s wage-earning work merely supplemented the income of the male wage earner who presumably headed the Japanese household. What motivated workers belonging to Sōhyō-affiliated unions to join

strikes coordinated by Sōhyō, even when their own unions had already reached a settlement with management, was the dream of a base wage that allowed a working man to support his family (Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyōgikai 1964, 362-373; Tōkyō Chihō Rōdō Kumiai Hyōgikai 1980, 491-511).

All through the 1950s and 1960s, nationally coordinated strike actions won contracts granting aggregate base-percentage increases in workers' wages worked which resulted in aggregate hourly wages nearly doubling for all wage earners between 1955 and 1965. However, wage gains were not distributed equally. Women certainly bore the worst of this burden in the form of lower wages overall, but the wage gap between male blue-collar workers aged 20–24 and 30–34 also widened to 38 percent (Ōmachi 1964, 65-73; Nihon Tōkei Kyōkai 1975, 398-99). Later, the wage gap between male workers aged 20–24 and 30–34 narrowed to 34 percent from 1965 to 1975, while the wage gap for the cohort of men who were 30–34 years in 1975 (and in their early twenties in 1965) and men of the age cohort ten years older (40–44 years) also narrowed slightly to 12 percent, indicating a general flattening of age-based wage disparities that appeared to bode well for the wage-earning prospects of blue-collar men belonging to younger age cohorts. Although younger men still made two-thirds of that earned by older male co-workers, the difference was not as great as it had been just ten years previous. Indeed, men aged 20-24 holding manufacturing jobs earned 68 percent of the wages earned by men aged 30-34, while transportation and communication sector workers earned 71 percent. Male utility workers aged 20-24 earned 64 percent, and male service sector workers, which included government employees and teachers, 65 percent. (Nihon Tōkei Kyōkai 1975, 70-75, 398-99).

Blue-collar men were doing well, and union leaders heavily invested in schemes promoting social roles for blue-collar men that defined manliness in terms of work and wages as a means encouraging a distinct political agenda. Social expectations that a “real man” worked for his family increasingly became the norm. Yet many young men had reported to union officials a decade earlier their dismay that even by the age of thirty they did not make enough to marry, a predicament that threatened to become a self-perpetuating cycle—a man could not make enough to get married, but he would not be paid a high wage until he married (Gerteis 2009, 129-130). Indeed, in addition to a wife, higher wages would also allow the acquisition of a host of consumer products recently arrived on the national scene, and in the minds of many blue-collar men the achievement of manhood had become tantamount to joining the middle class. Despite the narrowing of wage disparities between younger and older men, the rhetorical and material reality appear to have combined to create a wage and status hierarchy that subordinated male blue-collar youth.

Union economist Ōmachi Keisuke thought that there was trouble brewing for the near future. Writing for the labor magazine *Monthly Sōhyō* (*Gekkan Sōhyō*) in 1964, Ōmachi

observed that the wage disparity between men in their twenties and men in their thirties (young and middle-aged) played a significant role in the “graying” of the labor movement. The majority of workers in the rapidly growing communications, transportation, and service sectors were aged twenty-five to thirty, but the average age of union members in those same sectors would soon reach thirty-five. Ōmachi argued that although workers under the age of thirty comprised more than half of the workforce, the rapid economic growth experienced during the preceding decade had facilitated a significant wage disparity between young and middle-aged men that was far worse in Japan than in Western Europe or the United States. Ōmachi warned of dire consequences for Sōhyō if the trend went unaddressed for much longer (Ōmachi 1964, 65-73).

Ōmachi’s article pinpointed a problem that Sōhyō leaders preferred to ignore. Sōhyō unions had won contracts that secured better wages and faster promotion tracking for men in exchange for management schemes that, regardless of skill or ability, systemically relegated women and young men to the lower-paying base of the workforce. Sōhyō unions had agreed to contracts paying younger men and women less as a means of defraying the cost of higher wages for middle-aged men. Young workers, both males and females under the age of thirty, comprised a significantly larger percentage of the waged workforce than unions had on their membership rolls. While the low rates of unionization among young workers resulted from a variety of causes, Ōmachi argued that the significant part of the problem lay with the wage disparity between younger and middle-aged men that underpinned the family wage model advocated by Sōhyō since the mid-1950s.

While union leaders did not at first agree with Ōmachi’s assessment that the “graying” of union membership was an economic problem, the Sōhyō Youth Department nonetheless began to call for improved wages for younger workers, which seemed to result in a slight narrowing of the wage differential between younger and older men. That the average age of Sōhyō members continued to rise (reaching thirty-three in 1970) suggests that despite a narrowed pay differential, Sōhyō unions continued to have a difficult time recruiting young members. Wage and union membership data offer only a glimpse of the economic basis of worker mentality, but it seems likely that the declining numbers of young blue-collar union members was in part the result of an emerging generational rift between blue-collar men.

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